



Illyrian Fugue

Scott Krieger



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August 10, 1813, Paris

My friend,
The tides crest for you and Illyria. Proclaim independence
and rally against Austria's claim. Illyria, rise!
Napoleon

I leapt from the bridge of myself into the river of myself. I was a vector passing through the ether on a chill afternoon. That day was like any other, a crisp blanket of snow, no wind, fresh tingles of light on the air.

November 1805. The castle held more guns than soldiers. Pressed before the French advance, Austria forced every able body into uniform. I came from Baden to study Philosophy at the University. They put a rifle in my hands, a bayonet above my head. So quickly our fates are decided. I marveled at the sudden changes to my station, at attention in a borrowed green uniform. I was to cross the bridge, four men under my command, made into an Austrian Lieutenant while still formulating the very idea of a command I might issue with authority, my head full of conjugations.

§

The scattered bones of my meal, three doves off a spit. Memories effervesce, hard winter reminders. The village *ban* asked our help to wrangle stray goats off the mountain for the feast of the Dew of Kupala. If we didn't take them, he assured us, the goats would go wild in the hills, brigands would sustain themselves, wolves would grow more plentiful on their flesh. We were to take down a dozen head for the festivities if we could catch them. So many shepherds gone.

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We traded half-day shifts at the semaphore tower: one sleeps, one watches and the third performs menial tasks:

collecting provisions from the village, repairing equipment, chopping wood, performing experiments. We had two old flintlocks and our natural defenses to guard us from insurrection. Mostly we stayed separate, each engaged in his own time.

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As there is no one to bring my appeals to, not any who might offer solace, I endeavor not to repeat my mistake and have chosen to be more assiduous in the protection of my notes.

§

Olivia,

I am always running, chasing, not breathless but sure, pressing toward waves of you, to taste just an instant of you. You fill all the air before me and though I reach toward you without fail, you exhaust my advances. I collapsed on the stones and recovered my senses only moments ago. Dust has settled over me. An age has passed and I've lain unaware of the world. Or has it been just a moment?

§

It wasn't that I'd dived into the Danube *per se*. I stumbled and went sideways into the water. I saw reflections on the underside of the surface, the image of the sky fractured and woven with the image of the deep and myself there receding while the river dragged me along. Sky and bird graced the currents in turn with stone and reed. I felt the deep press. I was no one, lost, drifting in the racing heart of the current, rolling in the belly of the river for what seemed like hours, a blank drifting toward blackness, resolving into nothing.

§

When the soldiers came for more conscripts, a stooped

crone took hold of my sleeve and would not let go. She clutched a shriveled turnip by the green and thrust it at me while she told her tale. Ravished by marauders, she could no longer bear children. The father, an orphan from a once great clan, had fallen to calamity. Her boy was the sole representative of his lineage, last of the Kunars, bearing descent from men of apparent repute long past, native to this land. She moaned to give up her only possible son to be made into a villain. He was the last of their blood. Never more would the family's name be known, though the legacy be prime. None remain after him. To ruin him ruins them all.

Herr Kunar fell in with the other conscripts. I remember he was tearing a scrap of latten and twisting thin strips into the form of a windlass. His mother clutched her turnip and wept, if she was truly his mother.

§

"The bloody battle of Wagram is still fresh in my memory though it's been over a year now. We built bridges over the Danube then watched men die in droves to defend them. We assembled and watched the Grand Battery bowl over rows of troops on the slick field, cannons placed with precision to throw back the Austrian advance, clouds of living blood threshed from the piled bodies. Such victories are devoid of valor. A punishing rebuttal for the humiliations of Essing when Austrian geniuses floated burning mill barges down upon the bridgeworks still under construction, that brilliant labor brought to naught. Faith in the lashings of planks. Napoleon, and so France, proved more willing to bargain death for victory, to press men into the muddy ground and make new dirt of them. The severity of the concessions the treaty dictated were bought with this harrowing. Bloody battlefields gave everyone pause to reconsider another coalition. This peace is like nothing before in Europe."

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A riot broke out in the village. For three days the villagers raged against the *Fronki* presence. During those three nights we made our deepest explorations of the cavern beneath the semaphore unit. We were looking for another exit into the valley below so we might slip away should the need arise. The semaphore was perched atop an eight meter high limestone pillar five meters in diameter, ascended via a spiral of oak planks. The villagers surrounded our retreat. We demolished the first turn of the platform. They tossed their torches. A swirl of flame rose up into the night. The wind drove a wall of fire all around us. In the dumbfounded silence, Captain Max von Büch found the heart to appeal to the crowd, as if his words could penetrate their disdain.

"Illyrians, listen! Stand proud in your revolutionary cause! Redirect your anger away from us. We seek only to serve you. We seek only to teach you those very principles that now stir within you. Rage. Rage at the ills of your society. Make it your sworn cause to the death! Become men of this nation. Let no other rule you! Illyria, rise up!"

He only drove their rage higher, both their leader and their enemy.

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"I labored the whole length of negotiations blasting open fortresses all across Styria, coming at last to destroy the walls of Vienna. I was sent on to survey the Thalweg of the Sava River and draw the line on maps as to where Austria abutted the new nation, the Illyrian Provinces, according to the treaty of Schönbrunn."

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A chill wind off the sea. The priest in silent prayer shied from the window of the golden coach and four, saving his voice, trying to shed a cough. Sputum and grimace, shake of pain, in flight from the spasms that gripped him with every chill, feet propped on a tiny stove of red embers, the doomed

note of a cancer in his lungs, rosary across his wrist, bible in his thin lap, down the long valley, clouds fast rolling. A brief storm buffeted the coach as it came off the mountain, shaking the carriage so the priest toppled on the bench. The long face of the scree field slid toward the Krk River.

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I was investigating occurrences of phosphorescence in lead deposits near Idria. Caverns go on for miles inside the mountain. Metal spills through cracks, warps around secondary limestone, crystallizes the years into ages. Here, the metal glows. New sciences will be needed to explain it. What properties of nature are on display? I don't know.

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Herr Kunar frittered with scraps of tin and lead, fashioning figurines to sell to the pilgrims arriving for the feast day. He fiddled crowned saints and lewd monks from the folded scraps. He designed a crank action to give movement to the scene. He waited, without knowing or caring, merely making his little figures and selling them to the pilgrims on their way to Scardona, just because he happened to make them for his own pleasure and the children on pilgrimage enjoyed them. By this arrangement a small commerce arose.

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We took air rifles and wineskins up on the mountain with the *ban* and a few goat herders, all fleet of foot. An idyllic life, hanging about entranced in the glory of nature, watching a few scrappy beasts take their grass. Broad vistas scattered my thoughts. Meanwhile, something in the darkness skulked and slathered. The wild herds ranged, their masters gone to war. Each falls victim to some calamity in time. We took what we could for the feast, twenty head in all.

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Zois designed a chair to move about his manor. Gout swelled his legs. He was in constant pain. He could walk, but only with great discomfort. His chair contrivance allowed him to move about freely with minimal effort, using his arms instead of his legs. The chair sat between a pair of tall wheels with a third, smaller wheel on a pivot at the back. Seated thus, his feet lay comfortably on a platform angled an inch off the ground. When he wanted to stop, he need only lean forward in the chair and the platform beneath his feet would tip forward and touch the ground, thereby lifting the rear wheel and securing him in place. To reposition himself, he'd lean back, tip the chair onto its rotatable third wheel, and by pushing on an exaggerated rim attached to the side wheels, he could steer himself around the main floor of the mansion from one table of books to another.

Zois received daily shipments of books to catalog and censor. He gave the first reading to many a treatise and judged them for publication, made notes, composed letters, cataloged rocks and minerals, and set the orthographic nomenclatures of Illyria in the Illyrian tongue. His physical infirmities only gave him further license to devote himself to his work. Every day there was a backlog of texts to review, slowly building the lexicon of Illyria, capturing examples of every word for a dictionary, while also taking in shipments of stones of interest from his iron mines.

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A niche hidden in a line of shadow among endless crevices. None will find who hasn't set himself to look in every cranny or is blessed to discover a hidden way. Through some rough handler in the future who stirs awake new plans, may they inspire new dreams of Illyria.

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